

This publication – along with the video documentation – acts as the culmination of a three-month artistic inquiry into the ‘publicness’ of a public art and museum collection. Its impetus was the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum’s forthcoming closure and renovation, alongside the construction of a new permanent Collection Centre in the community of Northfield, Aberdeen.

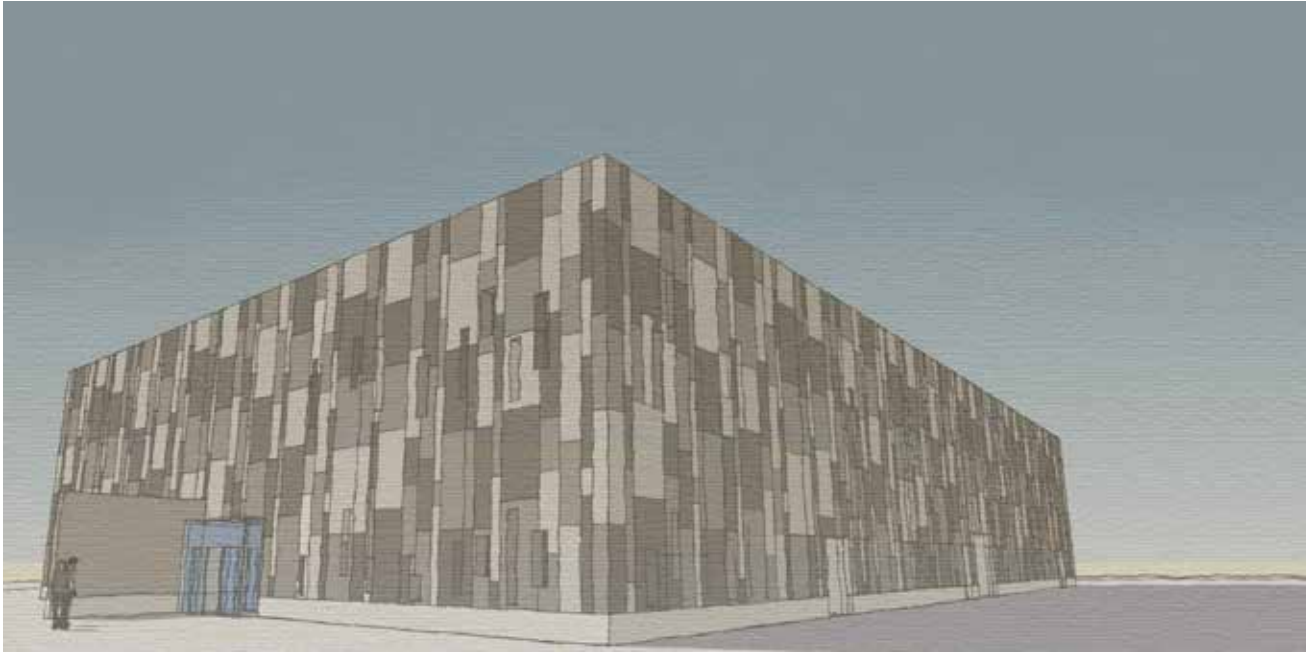
The book acts as the final ‘exhibition’ of this project in order that the discussions not be geographically limited to the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum alone. Being portable, it hopes to allow the conversations to travel to the locations they might be most relevant – i.e., Northfield. In that way, it is a movable exhibition and traces of many of the events that occurred over the course of this project.

It is difficult to translate events into an appropriately suitable form: any documentation can only ever be a pale imitation of the complexity and nuance that occur within the heart of the experiencer in fleeting, lived moments. Therefore, this book cannot truly portray the extent and depth of examination that occurred. However, it does hope to continue – in a different form – the inquiry into the purpose and administration of a public art collection, and how it relates to the wider community, to whom it actually belongs.



WE ALL CAST SHADOWS

Anthony Schrag
with Stuart Armitt, Alice Gamper and Natalie Kerr



ABOVE:

*Visulisation of the new
Collection Centre,
Northfield, Aberdeen*

PLACETIME / PLAYTIME

Anthony Schrag | June 2014

All art is context specific – every work has unique meanings and insights in localised points of space and time which are altered when they're relocated to new spatial or chronological circumstances. This is never more apparent when considering 'collections' – artworks amassed over time that, when taken together, seem to become historical objects, rather than 'artworks'.

The background to this artwork is that, next year, the Aberdeen Art Gallery will close for renovations and their collection will move to a new, purpose-built storage facility in Northfield: a traditionally rough, socio-economically challenged area.

This new Collection Centre will be not like a 'gallery' that anyone can enter, but there will be opportunities to explore the collection via a free booking system. It is planned that there will also be displays in the public entrance, as well as education projects, and hopes to bring much needed regeneration to the area. My brief was to explore how Aberdeen's Museum and Gallery 'public art collection' could be made more 'public' via developing events inspired by items within the city's vast and enviable collection, and would trace the movement of the collection from its current home in the City Centre to its future home in Northfield. The idea was to use objects from the past to negotiate the present, in order that that we can make the future better.

As my practice is 'physically-oriented' and due to the funding being linked to the Commonwealth Games, these were going to be sport-related events that could speak both about the power of art and the power of sport in society, in general.

The context of the new Collection Centre to be built in an area like Northfield provided an interesting backdrop against which to examine the place of public art as a contributing tool for social renewal, and hoped my project could begin to ask questions about the expectations of art considering things like 'community regeneration' or 'social cohesion' or even 'enrichment'. These are essential questions that need to be asked in regards to how museums, galleries and local authorities – institutions with ideological and financial capital – are employing public projects to promote the 'right' kind of culture. But what is this culture? And who decides it? And to what end?

The ethics of public engagement are a core concern of my work, and while my practice is often lumped in with 'socially-engaged' practices, and assumed to fit into the ubiquitous, child-friendly 'community arts' that is often the hallmark of public engagement, I am far more interested in asking difficult questions to the institutions that fund 'public participation.' In regards to this project, I needed to ensure the work was not just a marketing campaign that distracted the community from the fact that millions of pounds were to be spent on art, and not on suitable housing, correct infrastructure or health projects. The project therefore took a two-strand approach that focused as much on those who commission public artworks, (i.e., the institution – AAGM) as those who 'receive' those artworks (i.e., the public).

This publication documents some of those events and hopes to continue some of the discussions around the place of public art within civic contexts. As an 'endpoint' to the project, we also wanted to ensure that the conversations did not remain geographically fixed inside AAGM, and see this publication as a 'portable exhibition' that allows the examination of the purpose of public art to continue in places where it might be most relevant – i.e., Northfield.

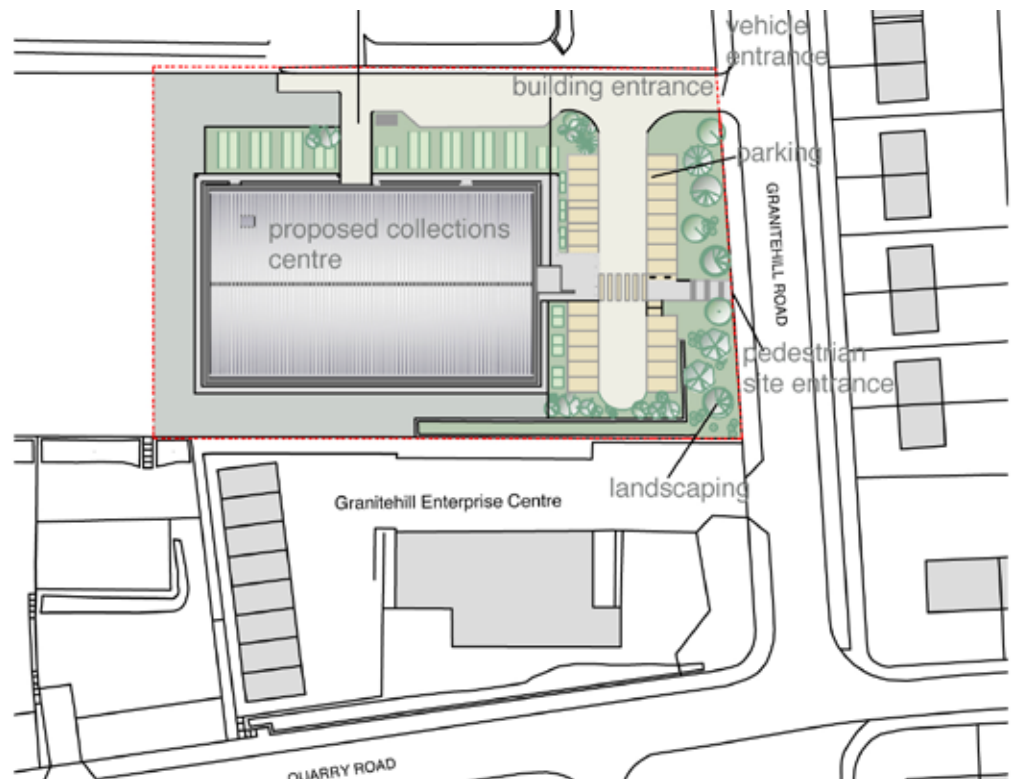
The politics of authorship are always fraught and for the purposes of this publication, we have included projects that have developed out of collaborations of many different kinds: collaborations between myself and communities; between communities and the art gallery; between the art gallery and myself; between myself and students; between myself and other artists – all variously contributing, shifting and changing the nature, focus and concepts of our individual projects. Indeed, this is the very nature of participation. Such fluidity muddies the modernist myth of the singular author and problematises the ownership of 'art'. For me, this is a positive development.

For the purposes of funding (and, to some degree, my own ego!) this publication then includes all projects that all fall under the umbrella of 'my' project, delineated by the initial concept that I proposed, and of which I policed the edges, borders and conceptual topographies. However, from that starting point, various people have developed their own contributions, including Stuart Armitt, Natalie Kerr, Alice Gamper, Kirsty Russell, Tako Taal and Dooa Kandil – and Fraser MacDonald for sending me many of these collaborators. Similarly, this work is a collaboration with the Aberdeen Art Gallery itself, and am grateful to all the staff who have helped make this project a reality, including (but not exclusively) Fiona Mair, Deirdre Grant, Julie Aitkin-Brown, Helen Fothergill, Elspeth Warren and Jason Williamson (indeed, the whole Williamson Clan!!). Additionally, Jacqui Innes at the Northfield

Community Centre has offered indispensable assistance, insight and advice, along with the other community members of Northfield, such as Madelene MacSween and her family. All of these kind folk have collaborated in the inquiry of the 'publicness of a public art collection.'

But how does one capture that inquiry? How does one communicate a process of examination which is not specifically about producing 'endpoints' or 'art objects' for exhibition, but rather about the politics of dialogic and agonistic aesthetics? If this book were to become part of the Art Gallery and Museum's collection, what would it look like to someone in the future? Will someone doing a 'participatory project' in 100 years time use this documentation of a few mad events as an example of a time where someone inquired into the state of public participation in 2014? Will those questions still be relevant? Is anyone paying attention to them now? That we live in a society wherein I/we are allowed – sometimes encouraged! – to explore and question the structures of art I think, speaks volumes about the positive state of art within Scotland, generally, but it does make me think of how much further we might need to go.

Personally, I prefer to think of my documents as the myths and stories that develop with the people I have spoken to during the course of the project: community leaders, collection professionals, amateur clubs, curators, school groups, gallery assistants – each one of them has been challenged as to what the role of art can ever be? And to whom? And when? And how is it being instrumentalised? I don't think a cohesive answer is important – we will, after all, have different answers – but rather the negotiation of the multiple perspectives is the salient quality. That, perhaps, is the only powerful and positive thing art can ever do.



LEFT:
*Proposed site plan of
the Collection Centre,
Northfield, Aberdeen*



LEFT:

Still Life (1973)

William Scott

Screenprint on paper,

67 x 88 cm

© 2014 William Scott

Foundation and

Aberdeen Art Gallery &

Museums Collections

HUMAN ROLLING COMPETITION

Union Terrace Gardens | 20 April 2014 | 1 – 4pm

For the first event, we were capitalising on pre-existing Easter celebrations that were happening next to the gallery. We looked for items within the collection that could compliment these events and found William Scott's *Still Life* (1973) and – reflecting on the original brief – I designed a Human Rolling competition, instead of the more traditional Easter activity of 'egg rolling'.

Often, as artists, we make sketches to try things out, to see what's working, and what's not. If you're a painter or sculptor in a studio, that's an easier thing to do because no one has to see your rough outlines, your unfinished thoughts and your unformed concepts. As someone who works in the public realm, however, this is more a complicated experience because your sketches happen out in the open, in front of everyone. As a sketch, this event revealed the flaws of the original brief and called into question the ethics of making artworks in public: for whom was the project intended? Who would benefit? To what end? Why would this event make connections to artworks in the collection? Should it? Such a random activity was certainly fun, but it did not necessarily ask interesting questions about the form and intention of public art, the power dynamics involved in such activities, nor the place of a public collection to civic society.

Sometimes, rolling along the floor isn't good 'art', but it did leave me wondering what purpose of this project was, and how it could be shifted to ask the right sorts of questions.

RIGHT:

Human Rolling

Competition, Union

Terrace Gardens,

20 April 2014

Photos by Shelagh Brown





TENNISH

Westburn Tennis Club | 3 May 2014 | 2 – 4pm

Learning from the previous event's lack of context and inquiry, I wanted to develop a work with a more focused group of participants and attempted to join up the Westburn Tennis Centre with Sir John Lavery's *The Tennis Party* (1885), seeking to find similarities and shared connections between this painting and their contemporary lives. The Art Gallery's website explains the painting: *"In spite of its apparent spontaneity, this picture is not merely an arbitrary slice of life. Male and female players are set against each other – possibly to suggest romantic pairings. A girl, on the threshold of adulthood, stands in waiting for the game of tennis, but also, perhaps, the game of love."*

I was curious to see if a shared topic – i.e., Tennis – could reverse the assumption that public art was something that was bestowed like a gift to an unsuspecting public, but instead something that could inform and contribute to lives in a non-hierarchical way via shared and collaborative connections. As such, we designed a social tennis party and aimed to re-create the painting in a contemporary manner, with all the same concerns of Lavery – adulthood, relationships, anticipation, and love.

The event was called 'Tennish' because it wasn't really Tennis – it was just sort of tennis. It was Tennish. It featured random games with multiple players, young versus old, a battle of the sexes, as well as a game of love.

As an event, it was successful in bringing new people to the painting, but there still existed in my mind a nagging concern about the intentions of delivering a certain kind of culture (i.e., art and museum works) to people who might engage in a different kind of culture – and which type culture was being valued more.

ABOVE:

The Tennis Party (1885)

Sir John Lavery

Oil on canvas,

76.2 x 183 cm

© 2014 Aberdeen Art

Gallery & Museums

Collections

LEFT & OVERLEAF:

Tennish, Westburn Tennis

Club, 3 May 2014

Photos by Stuart Armitt









A COLLECTION OF FAILURE

Northfield Community Centre

6 June 2014 | 9.30am – 12.30pm

The previous two events lead me to want to examine the intentions of commissioning public art as a tool for social renewal, especially considering the Collection Centre to be built was being presented as a regeneration project, and one that could have positive impacts on the community.

To inquire into these intentions, I invited the AAGM Team to the Northfield Community Centre for a reflection focused around how and why a 'public' collection exists. To do this, I utilised a medal presented to Robert Bruce in 1931 for his amateur world record for non-stop roller skating at Aberdeen's Music Hall: a still-standing record of 61 hours and 36 minutes. The item was donated to the collection by his daughter after Mr Bruce's death in 1970, and felt that this object raised questions about why items were collected: for the object's aesthetic quality? For its human story? For its relationship to Aberdeen? For its material worth? For its social history? As an object, Mr Bruce's medal problematised a public collection and I used it as a way to challenge how the institution related to itself. From this object, I proposed the Department of the Grey Area that could question the structures of the museum itself and how the formal processes of 'collecting' might limit a public's relationship to access, and thereby raise concerns of how/why it can be employed as a tool of social renewal.



ABOVE:

Sporting Medal and Box (1931)

Presented to Robert Bruce.

Donated to AAGM by his daughter, Mrs R Duncan.

Copper alloy, enamel, leather, metal, silk.

Medal: 4.7 x 3cm. Box: 5.5 x 7.5cm

© 2014 Aberdeen Art Gallery

& Museums Collections



THIS PAGE & OVERLEAF:
Photos and collages by Anthony Schrag

The proposition of the Department of the Grey Area was that if objects within the collection could move more fluidly between the collection departments, might they become more accessible to those outside those departments – i.e., in the public realm? Was the rigid collecting structure limiting the social possibilities of the public collection?

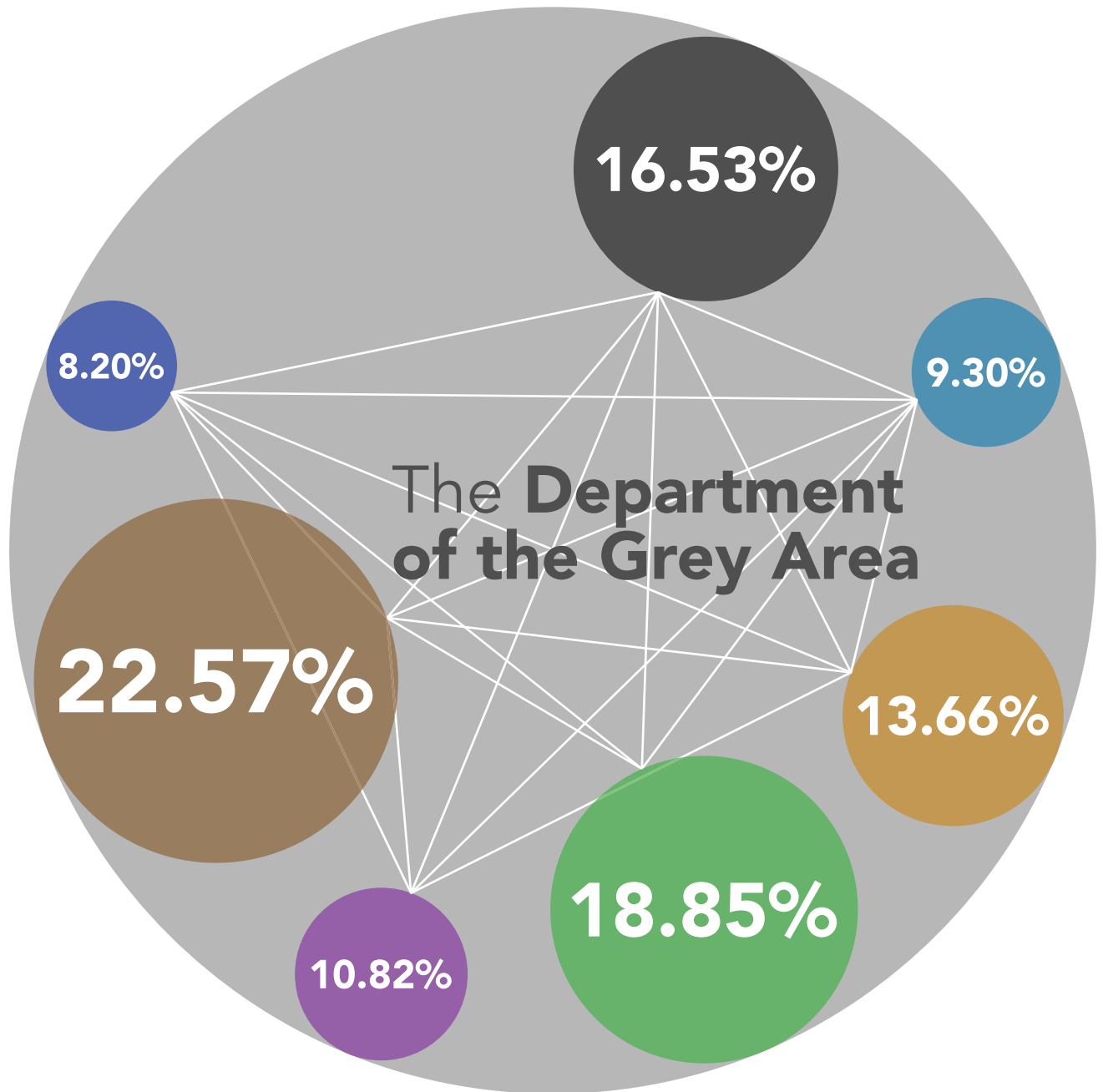
I also took secondary approach that looked at the utopian projection of the Collection Centre itself and questioned the notion of its 'success'. Slavoj Žižek suggests that in order to consider the success of something, its important to think of its failure; to imagine its utter annihilation – and it is only once that has been fully imagined, can you work backwards from that bitter endpoint to ensure the thing's success. Considering that, what would be the failure of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum's collection – and by extension, what is the failure of the new Collection Centre? How could it possibly fail in its mission and what ways could it be deficient in its provision? I devised some of the images here as a way to provoke discussion on how a collection might 'fail' and what that might look like.





The event culminated with a walk to the site of the new Collection Centre by an 'Art Gallery Invasion Force' made up of the collection and curating staff. In their white handling gloves, they became visible to all members of the Northfield community – not hidden behind office doors and ancient objects, but on display for who and what they were. From the discussions and walks, we collected 'actions points' that needed to be taken so that the Collection – as a collection of objects, and as a public provision – could succeed in its goals both ethically and civically. These points have been delivered to the AAGM's directors.

As an artwork, this project existed within the questions the collection and curating staff asked themselves about their own intentions and reasons for being involved in public art.



Aberdeen Museum and Gallery Collection

- **Archeology:** 16.53%
- **Decorative Arts:** 9.30%
- **Fine Art:** 13.66%
- **Maritime History:** 18.85%
- **Numismatics:** 10.82%
- **Science, Technology and Industry:** 22.57%
- **Social History:** 8.20%



NORTHFIELD BOXING DIALOGUE

By Alice Gamper

Northfield Community Centre | 9 June 2014 | 7 – 8pm

Artist Assistant Alice Gamper developed this project in response to conversations she initiated with the Byron Boxing Club. Of her project, she writes:

Having struck up a relationship with Byron Boxing Club, I created an event that would allow members to engage with items from the collection in a way that was relevant to their interests. I sought to create an open dialogue between club members, gallery staff and local councillors that would offer the opportunity for all parties to discuss how the moving of the collection would impact upon Northfield.

I think links have been forged between the gallery and the boxing club, and tentative plans for them to keep in touch were made. I think it definitely created a dialogue around – and interaction with – items from the collection. So in those senses, I feel that the project was a success. Also, from a personal development point of view, I learned A LOT!!!!

This project was centred around the painting T.V. (1960) by William Roberts, which features a family watching a boxing match on the black and white television, and reproduction of this work hung in the boxing ring to guide the conversations. As our agreement with the copyright holders of the painting required we destroy the reproduction after our event so as to not compromise the copyright, we invited the boxers to destroy the image by using their excellent boxing skills.

ABOVE:

T.V. (1960)

William Roberts

Oil on canvas,
101.7 x 183 cm

© 2014 Estate of John
David Roberts, by
permission of the William
Roberts Society and
Aberdeen Art Gallery and
Museums Collections

LEFT & OVERLEAF:

Northfield Community
Centre photos by
Stuart Armitt









SEARCHING FOR ATMOSPHERE

By Natalie Kerr

Byron Square, Northfield | In Process

ABOVE & OPPOSITE:

Photos by Nathalie Kerr

Participatory practices rarely fit into a neat 'start/finish' category, with the continual negotiation of engagement being the salient concern of the work. Artist Assistant Natalie Kerr's project operates in a similar manner and we include this work as 'work in process'. She explains her project here:



Talking inspiration from James McBey's illustrations for the Portfolio of Menu Cards and his Letters relating to the Omar Khayyam Club within the Collection, I looked to make a connection with the ethos of the Club dinners and the current local business within Lord Byron Square in Northfield. The Omar Khayyam Club was 'set up for the purpose of appreciating good company, good food, and the works of Omar Khayyam.'

After viewing James McBey's drawings I noticed a connection between my own artistic practice and the subjects of his small studies:

a fascination with people and their habitual ways. I am investigating how the same values of the Omar Khayyam Club can be seen in the people living and working within Byron Square. This area being in close proximity with the proposed site of the Collection Centre, I am looking to encourage this new group of people to feel welcomed into Northfield and create a dialogue between new and current residents.

I am working closely with the staff at the Byron Bakery and the Over 55's group at the Northfield community centre. Together we are looking at aspects of hospitality and nostalgia. I have been welcomed into both these group and invited to discuss local dialects and colloquial terms for sweet pastries local to the North East. I am building a branding around three specific confectionary pieces to create a 'pack' that the Byron Bakery can produce for both the new Collection Centre community and the existing community. I am highlighting skilled local business, indulgence, history and the importance of good hospitality.

LEFT:

Menu Card, Portfolio of Menu Cards and Letters Relating to the Khayyam Club (1924)

James McBey

Pen on paper

© 2014 By kind

permission of the family of James and Marguerite

McBey and Aberdeen

Art Gallery & Museums

Collections







WE ALL CAST SHADOWS

Granitehill Road (site of future Collection Centre)

30 June 2014 | 1 – 4pm

That this project should end with the artwork that most people see on first entering the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum has a cyclic resonance. Dame Barbara Hepworth's sculpture is the most visible and most present artwork in the gallery, both limiting and guiding AAGM's main hall. As an artwork, it casts shadows onto the others around it and stands steadfast and certain with a pride of place that focuses all eyes towards it.

I began to think of this work as conceptual doppelganger to the future Collection Centre, something that acts as a focus, demands attention, and casts shadows on all that surrounds it.

But, if it does that, will it give space and time and attention to all the other things that happen in Northfield? The lived lives? The existing indigenous culture? The people of Northfield? The final event aimed to intertwine my two approaches of working with 'the public' and with 'the institution' and bring together the people of Northfield and the staff of AAGM. I felt that if there was going to be any lasting, positive legacy of the construction of the Collection Centre – for both Northfield and AAGM – it could only come in real, human connections, not gestures of inclusion. Any social renewal has to be developed in collaboration with that society that is to be 'renewed'.

LEFT & ABOVE:

Oval Form – Trezion

(1962 – 1963)

Dame Barbara Hepworth

Bronze on marble,

91 x 144 cm

© 2014 Bowness,

Hepworth Estate &

Aberdeen Art Gallery and

Museums Collections

Photos by Stuart Armitt





25 Years of
Contemporary Art
in Scotland

GENERATION

PLAYTIME/PLACETIME is part of GENERATION, a landmark series of exhibitions celebrating 25 years of contemporary art in Scotland, established as a national programme by Creative Scotland, Glasgow Life and National Galleries of Scotland.

COLOPHON

Book design: Tommy Perman (www.surfacepressure.net)

Photography: Stuart Armitt (www.stuartarmitt.com)
Shelagh Brown
Nathalie Kerr
Anthony Schrag

Fonts used: Headings: Umbra
Body: Avenir

All text © Anthony Schrag 2014 unless otherwise stated.

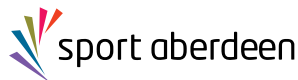
Published by Aberdeen City Council 2014.

ISBN 978-0-900017-77-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission of the publishers.

Every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders. If proper acknowledgement has not been made, we ask copyright holders to contact the publishers.

ABERDEEN ART GALLERY
& MUSEUMS



MANAGED AND FUNDED BY



SUPPORTED BY



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

